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ABSTRACT

As part of a broader national effort, 509 Floridians statewide responded to a survey of attitudes toward higher education in 2000. In many ways, the attitudes of Floridians are similar to those of respondents to a national survey. The four conclusions emerging from this research are supported by national findings: (1) Floridians believe that higher education is vitally important for success in the contemporary world, with 89% believing that a college degree now as important as a high school diploma used to be; (2) higher education means more than just a piece of paper, as interpersonal skills learned in college are valued highly; (3) Floridians believe that the main responsibility for success in higher education rests with the students, but they also expect institutions to help those who help themselves; and (4) paying for college is difficult but feasible, with 63% of Floridians disagreeing that families are doing a good job saving for college. In common with respondents from the rest of the United States, Florida residents support a range of financial aid proposals to increase access to higher education. (SLD)

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS: How Floridians View Higher Education

John Immerwahr

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

August 2000

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS:

How Floridians View Higher Education

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR
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GREAT EXPECTATIONS:

How Floridians View Higher Education

By John Immerwahr

A Report Prepared by Public Agenda
And Funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

August 2000

NATIONAL CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND HIGHER EDUCATION
AND PUBLIC AGENDA

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Foreword

Great Expectations: How Floridians View Higher Education is part of a broader effort of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Public Agenda to stimulate a public discussion about the role of colleges and universities in maintaining and enhancing the opportunities for all Americans to participate fully in our society. This special survey complements a larger survey administered to the entire nation and released in May, called *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American and Hispanic—View Higher Education*. These reports are available in full at www.highereducation.org, and in summary at www.publicagenda.org.

John Immerwahr, the author of both the national and Florida reports, has done a masterful job of explaining the most significant trends in public attitudes about higher education, and of illuminating the key similarities and differences between the views of Floridians and Americans generally. His findings are based on a national sample of over 1,000 adults and a state sample of over 500 Floridians.

We would like to thank the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for sponsoring this special survey of Floridians' attitudes. We would also like to extend our appreciation to the organizations whose financial support made the national report possible: The Ford Foundation, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, and the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement.

Patrick M. Callan
President
National Center for Public Policy
and Higher Education

In early 2000, Public Agenda surveyed 509 Floridians statewide to determine their attitudes toward higher education. In many ways, the attitudes of Floridians regarding higher education are strikingly similar to the views of the nation as a whole, as revealed in our broader survey of public attitudes, *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education.* Four major conclusions emerged from our Florida research, which are also supported by what we found nationwide. In addition, the final section of this report describes a few areas where the attitudes of Floridians differ somewhat from those of Americans generally.

For the purpose of this research, we define *higher education* broadly to include all education and training beyond high school, including two- and four-year, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit institutions.

Finding One:

FLORIDIANS BELIEVE THAT HIGHER EDUCATION IS VITALLY IMPORTANT FOR SUCCESS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD.

Most people in Florida believe that a higher education is essential for a person to succeed in today's world. In effect, Florida residents now see a college education as having replaced a high school diploma as the minimum entry ticket to a solid job and a middle-class life style.

In the survey we found:

- ★ Fully 89% strongly or somewhat agree that a college degree has become as important as a high school diploma used to be.
- ★ Only 18% think that it is possible to reach a point where too many people have a college degree; the overwhelming majority (77%) believe that this is one area where there can never be too much of a good thing.

As higher education is being seen as more important for success in today's economy and society, the public is also placing a premium on the significance of preserving access to higher education for anyone who is sufficiently qualified and motivated. In effect, Floridians see access to higher education as equivalent to access to the American dream. Specifically, Floridians do not want students to be excluded from a college education by cost alone. Seventy-seven percent strongly agree that we should not allow the price of a college education to keep qualified and motivated students from going to college.

Finding Two:

HIGHER EDUCATION IS MORE THAN JUST A PIECE OF PAPER.

Floridians have high expectations for what they expect students to take away from a college education. We presented our respondents with a list of factors and asked how important each was as a goal for a college education. The most commonly selected factor is that students learn how to get along with people different from themselves, with 73% of Floridians ranking this as absolutely essential. An almost equally high percentage (72%) say that it is absolutely essential for students to gain a sense of maturity and to learn how to manage on their own.

Although these general interpersonal skills top the list, there are a number of other skills that are rated as absolutely essential by Floridians, such as learning the specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they have chosen (64%), learning high-tech skills (63%), learning to solve problems and think analytically (62%), as well as gaining top-notch writing and speaking skills (61%).

The Florida public also has high expectations for the administrators who run local colleges and universities. For example, 73% say it is absolutely essential for colleges to hire good teachers and researchers, and 60% stress that colleges should ensure that students work hard to achieve high standards.

The majority of people in the state value the education that a student receives, not just the piece of paper. Fifty-nine percent believe that college graduates get higher salaries because having a college degree means someone has skills and accomplishments, as opposed to 34% who think that employers just get impressed by a degree.

The public has high expectations, but they also seem to be pleased with the job Florida's public and private colleges and universities are doing, especially as compared to the performance of the state's high schools. Fifty-seven percent give the state's colleges an excellent or a good rating, as opposed to only 29% who give state high schools a good or excellent rating.

Finding Three:

FLORIDIANS BELIEVE THAT THE MAIN RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESTS WITH THE STUDENT, BUT THEY ALSO EXPECT INSTITUTIONS TO HELP THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES.

The Florida public sees a higher education not as an entitlement, but as something students should have to work for, and the notion of a free higher education is not attractive to very many state residents. Seventy-one percent strongly or somewhat agree that students only appreciate the value of an education when they have some personal responsibility for paying what it costs.

By the same token, Florida residents feel that what a student gets out of a college education is largely a result of the amount of effort the student puts in. We asked our Florida respondents whether the benefits of a higher education depend more on how much effort the student puts in or on the quality of the college. The overwhelming majority (80%) said that effort was the key.

Floridians also placed the responsibility for success in college on the student. Seventy-three percent say that when a student falls behind, it is primarily the responsibility of the student to get back on track. This does not mean that colleges have no responsibility; 66% also agree that colleges should provide advisors and counselors for students who fall behind.

When it comes to thinking about financial aid, Floridians continue to emphasize individual effort, believing that aid should go first to students who work hard. Eighty-two percent say that they would prefer to give financial aid to a student with average skills who works hard, rather than to a student with excellent skills who does not work hard.

Finding Four:

PAYING FOR COLLEGE IS DIFFICULT BUT DOABLE.

College is perceived as expensive, and 63% of Florida residents strongly or somewhat disagree that families are doing a good job of saving for college. Floridians are divided on the question of whether there are many qualified people who are currently unable to go to college. Forty-eight percent feel that there are many people who are qualified to go to college but do not have an opportunity to do so, while 44% say that the vast majority of those who are qualified have an opportunity to do so.

But the majority of Floridians are convinced that where there is a will, there is a way. Ninety percent either strongly (68%) or somewhat (22%) agree that people who really want to go to college can find a way to pay for it even if they have to go to school and work at the same time.

Floridians also support a broad range of financial aid proposals, with 78% thinking that the government should offer more tax breaks for students, 78% favoring more funds for work-study, and 61% favoring more money for loans. Direct grants to students were somewhat less popular; only 49% favored more money for grants.

FLORIDA AND THE NATION AT LARGE

In many of the areas we have discussed so far, the attitudes of Floridians are not significantly different from those of the nation as a whole. There are a few areas where the attitudes of Floridians do differ somewhat from the national perspective.

One area of difference concerns the problem of underprepared students. This is a problem that most Americans have not really thought through—the number of people who say they don't know enough to answer this question is remarkably high. At the same time, nearly half (45%) of Floridians think it is a problem if students struggle when they get to college because they are not academically prepared, as opposed to 9% who do not think this is a problem (47% say they don't know enough to say). The percentage of those who think this is a problem in Florida is significantly higher than in the nation as a whole, where only 37% identify this as a problem (and 52% say they don't know enough to say). This may also be related to the negative evaluation that Floridians give to their high schools. Forty-nine percent of Floridians give their state public high schools a rating of only fair or poor, as compared to 41% who say this nationwide.

Conversely, Floridians are more likely to see community colleges as a solution to the problem of underprepared students. We asked our Florida residents what to do with college applicants who lack the necessary skills to succeed in college. Fifty-nine percent of Floridians thought that the solution was to admit these students to a two-year college, as compared to a smaller percentage nationwide (53%) who thought so. Florida residents generally have a high estimation of community colleges. Fifty-eight percent say that community colleges in the state are doing an excellent or good job, compared to 50% who say this nationwide. In the nation as a whole, people are more likely to give higher grades to four-year colleges than to community colleges. In Florida, by contrast, this pattern is reversed: ratings for community colleges were slightly higher than they were for four-year colleges, with 58% giving an excellent or good rating to two-year colleges.

Supporting Tables

Table One

Satisfaction with High Schools and Colleges

Are the [INSERT ITEM] in your state doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job, or don't you know enough to say?

% responding	*National*	*Florida*
Public High Schools		
Excellent	6	7
Good	27	23
Fair	28	29
Poor	13	19
Don't Know	25	22
Colleges		
Excellent	15	13
Good	42	44
Fair	13	15
Poor	3	4
Don't Know	28	24
Four-Year Colleges		
Excellent	15	14
Good	40	44
Fair	10	13
Poor	2	2
Don't Know	33	27
Two-Year Colleges		
Excellent	14	17
Good	36	41
Fair	14	14
Poor	2	3
Don't Know	34	25

National, n = 1,015; Florida, n = 509.

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Table Two

Attitudes toward Higher Education

% responding	National	Florida
We should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so		
Strongly agree	78	77
Somewhat agree	15	14
Somewhat disagree	3	5
Strongly disagree	2	2
A college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be		
Strongly agree	68	72
Somewhat agree	19	17
Somewhat disagree	8	6
Strongly disagree	4	4
If someone really wants to go to college, they can find a way to pay for it, even if they have to go to school and work at the same time		
Strongly agree	63	68
Somewhat agree	24	22
Somewhat disagree	8	5
Strongly disagree	5	5
Today's colleges should be doing a much better job of keeping their costs down		
Strongly agree	60	60
Somewhat agree	23	20
Somewhat disagree	7	8
Strongly disagree	4	6
Students have to borrow too much money to pay for their college education		
Strongly agree	56	52
Somewhat agree	24	26
Somewhat disagree	11	11
Strongly disagree	4	5
Students appreciate the value of a college education only when they have some personal responsibility for paying what it costs		
Strongly agree	47	43
Somewhat agree	27	28
Somewhat disagree	16	18
Strongly disagree	8	9
Almost anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get loans or financial aid		
Strongly agree	33	37
Somewhat agree	29	28
Somewhat disagree	17	14
Strongly disagree	15	15
There are too many students in college who don't belong there		
Strongly agree	27	28
Somewhat agree	22	19
Somewhat disagree	22	23
Strongly disagree	18	19
Most families today do a good job of saving for their children's college education		
Strongly agree	10	11
Somewhat agree	18	19
Somewhat disagree	33	31
Strongly disagree	32	32

National, n = 1,015; Florida, n = 509.

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Table Three

What Should a Student Gain from College?

How important is each of the following in terms of what students should gain from attending college? [INSERT ITEM] Is that absolutely essential, important but not essential, or not too important?

% responding	*National*	*Florida*
A sense of maturity and how to manage on their own		
Absolutely essential	71	72
Important but not essential	26	25
Not too important	2	2
An ability to get along with people different from themselves		
Absolutely essential	68	73
Important but not essential	29	25
Not too important	2	2
An improved ability to solve problems and to think analytically		
Absolutely essential	63	62
Important but not essential	34	35
Not too important	1	1
Learning high-tech skills, such as using computers and the Internet		
Absolutely essential	61	63
Important but not essential	35	32
Not too important	4	4
Specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they have chosen		
Absolutely essential	60	64
Important but not essential	35	33
Not too important	4	2
Top-notch writing and speaking skills		
Absolutely essential	57	61
Important but not essential	38	35
Not too important	4	4
The responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and volunteering		
Absolutely essential	44	50
Important but not essential	47	42
Not too important	9	7
Exposure to great writers and thinkers in subjects like literature and history		
Absolutely essential	32	34
Important but not essential	53	51
Not too important	14	13

National, n = 1,015; Florida, n = 509.

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Methodology

This report is based on a telephone survey of 509 adults aged 18 years or older who reside in Florida. It complements a national telephone survey of 1,015 adults. The interviews with Florida residents were conducted in January 2000 and averaged 28 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted using a random sample of households in Florida and a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the region covered had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error for the 509 randomly selected Florida adults is +/– 4 percentage points.

The questionnaire was designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

About the Author

John Immerwahr is a Senior Research Fellow at Public Agenda and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Villanova University. He has written several previous Public Agenda reports on higher education, including *Doing Comparatively Well: Why the Public Loves Higher Education and Criticizes K–12* (1999); *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education* (1998); *Preserving the Higher Education Legacy: A Conversation with California Leaders* (1995); and *The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System* (1993). In addition, he has authored and co-authored a number of other Public Agenda reports on education, including the groundbreaking national study, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (1994) and, for the 1996 National Education Summit of the nation's governors and business leaders, *Americans' Views on Standards: An Assessment by Public Agenda* (1996). Other state-specific studies written by Dr. Immerwahr include *What Our Children Need: South Carolinians Look at Public Education* (1996) and *The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education* (1993).

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98-2 *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr (Spring 1998). A national survey of Americans' views on higher education, conducted and reported by Public Agenda.

98-3 *Organizing for Learning: The View from the Governor's Office*, by James B. Hunt Jr., Governor of North Carolina and Chair of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (June 1998). An address to the American Association for Higher Education concerning opportunity in higher education.

98-4 *Tidal Wave II Revisited: A Review of Earlier Enrollment Projections for California Higher Education*, by Gerald C. Hayward, David W. Breneman and Leobardo F. Estrada (September 1998). Finds that earlier forecasts of a surge in higher education enrollments were accurate.

98-5 *The Challenges Facing California Higher Education: A Memorandum to the Next Governor of California*, by David W. Breneman (September 1998). Concludes that the next governor should give serious consideration to exploring a new Master Plan for Higher Education.

98-6 *Federal Tuition Tax Credits and State Higher Education Policy: A Guide for State Policy Makers*, by Kristin D. Conklin (December 1998). Examines the implications of the new federal income tax provisions on students and their families, and makes recommendations for state higher education policy.

98-7 *Higher Education Governance: Balancing Institutional and Market Influences*, by Richard C. Richardson, Jr., Kathy Reeves Bracco, Patrick M. Callan, and Joni E. Finney (November 1998). Describes the structural relationships that affect institutional efficacy in higher education, and argues that effective state policy achieves a balance between institutional and market forces.

98-8 *The Challenges and Opportunities Facing Higher Education: An Agenda for Policy Research*, by Dennis Jones, Peter Ewell, and Aims McGuinness (December 1998). Argues that due to substantial changes in the landscape of postsecondary education, new state-level policy frameworks must be developed and implemented.

99-1 *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr (January 1999). Reports the views of those most involved with decision-making about higher education, based on a survey and focus groups conducted by Public Agenda.

99-2 *South Dakota: Developing Policy-Driven Change in Higher Education*, by Mario Martinez (June 1999). Describes the processes for change in higher education that government, business and higher education leaders are creating and implementing in South Dakota.

99-3 *State Spending for Higher Education in the Next Decade: The Battle to Sustain Current Support*, by Harold A. Hovey (July 1999). This fiscal forecast of state and local spending patterns finds that the vast majority of states will face significant fiscal deficits over the next eight years, which will in turn lead to increased scrutiny of higher education in almost all states, and to curtailed spending for public higher education in many states.

00-1 *A State-by-State Report Card on Higher Education: Prospectus* (March 2000). The National Center is developing a state-by-state report card that compares and evaluates each state's performance in higher education. The goal of the report card is to stimulate the creation of state policies that enhance opportunity and achievement in higher education.

00-2 *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American and Hispanic—View Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr with Tony Foleno (May 2000). This report by Public Agenda finds that Americans overwhelmingly see higher education as essential for economic mobility; parents overwhelmingly believe that their children must go to college; and African American and Hispanic parents value higher education especially highly. The report is based on the most extensive survey ever conducted on public views about higher education.

00-2b *Great Expectations: How Pennsylvanians View Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr (May 2000). This report by Public Agenda compares Pennsylvanians' views on higher education to those of Americans generally.

00-2c *Great Expectations: How Floridians View Higher Education*, by John Immerwahr (August 2000). This report by Public Agenda compares Floridians' views on higher education to those of Americans generally.

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